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Beyond Southern Honor: Dueling Masculinities in the Life of Robert Carter

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BEYOND SOUTHERN HONOR:

DUELING MASCULINITIES IN THE LIFE OF ROBERT CARTER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study uses the 1853-1859 letters of Robert Carter, a Lieutenant in the United States Navy, to his wife, Louise Humphreys Carter, to examine antebellum southern masculinity. The letters offer an example of the attitude toward marriage, childrearing, women, religion, naval life, and foreigners of an antebellum evangelical southern naval officer.

Robert's identities as an elite white southerner, an evangelical Christian, and a naval officer intersected and conflicted to produce a complex man. He was uncomfortable in the hyper-masculine world of shipboard life, in which his manliness was questioned by himself and his fellow officers, so he constructed through his letters the domestic world in which he felt more at ease.

Robert's discomfort in a masculine world, his view of the home as a haven from the outside world, and his evangelical attitude toward childcare are at odds with the general interpretation of southern masculinity that focuses on personal honor. This study avoids a simple construction of southern manhood that plays on separate spheres for men and women, of public and private worlds, and explores a fractured and complex set of manly identities in which race, class, gender, profession, family history, and religion are all implicated. It suggests that even at the height of sectional conflict, southern white manhood was infinitely more complicated than has been previously realized.

BEYOND SOUTHERN HONOR:

DUELING MASCULINITIES IN THE LIFE OF ROBERT CARTER

INTRODUCTION

> The world is all a humbug and we are mere fancies when in it, coming, changing, gone, part of the show maybe, perhaps not, one century later who knows or cares.

So wrote Robert Carter in a letter to his wife, Louise, in June 1858 while he was in South America. He was wrong to assume that no one would have any interest in his life, for although Carter was an undistinguished naval officer, his letters shed light on a neglected area of antebellum society--Southern masculinity.

The antebellum South has been well documented. A plethora of studies chronicle white and black family life, racial interaction, and the position of women. These areas of study are marked by ongoing disputes over varying interpretations. Analysis of elite southern masculinity, however, is remarkably static. Bertram Wyatt-Brown's 1982 examination of white southern men as patriarchal, chivalrous, and obsessed with honor, has remained virtually unchallenged. Their behavior was shaped by ideals of gentility and honor, but with an undercurrent of violence. Piety and learning took second place to chivalry in this depiction of the South. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's 1988 description of southern men as "strong, masterful, quick to anger, ready with his pistol,

sometimes too fond of liquor, but, withal, chivalrous and protective of those who accepted the legitimacy of his claim to command," shows that in a time of massive revision of antebellum society, little had changed in the interpretation of southern men.[1]

This greatly generalized version of southern manhood, which allows for little variation, does not adequately explain Robert Carter. He was born on September 15, 1825, the second son of Hill Carter and Mary Braxton Randolph Carter of Shirley Plantation outside Richmond in Tidewater Virginia. He was educated at the Episcopal High School of Virginia before joining the United States Navy at sixteen as a Midshipman. Robert was sent first to the Pacific squadron and was involved in the Mexican War; he returned in 1848 to attend the newly-established Naval Academy at Annapolis and graduated the following year. In 1850, he was part of an expedition to the Arctic, and he returned home for his wedding.

On a snowy Thursday in January 1852, Robert Carter married Louise Humphreys at St. Anne's Church in Annapolis, Maryland. Louise's father, Hector Humphreys, was President

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[1]Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South (Oxford, 1982); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1988), 197. More recently, Peter Bardaglio, "'An Outrage upon Nature': Incest and the Law in the Nineteenth-Century South," and Catherine Clinton, "'Southern Dishonor': Flesh, Blood, Race, and Bondage," in Carol Bleser, ed., In Joy and in Sorrow: Women, Family, and Marriage in the Victorian South, 1830-1900 (New York, 1991), have offered interesting, but still monolithic, studies of Southern men.

of St. John's College in Annapolis. Yet this was by no means a typical marriage of elite southerners--Robert's duties as an officer in the United States Navy meant that the couple spent less than four of their first fourteen years of marriage together. Robert, however, was a prolific writer; his many letters to Louise exhibit not only his attitude toward their marriage but also to marriage in general, to childrearing, and the proper conduct of women; he reflects as well on his life in the navy, and offers a glimpse of the countries he visited and of the people whom he met there.[2]

Robert's letters reveal a complex man, divided in many ways. Most obvious is his enforced, constant participation in the male-dominated world of shipboard life, which conflicted with his desire to retreat to the domestic world of his immediate family. Growing up in the South in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, Robert would have absorbed the ideas and conventions of that society--most particularly ideas of honor and manhood. Although his views of race and class resemble those of his southern peers, his ideas about childrearing, women, and religion diverge sharply from the uniform model presented by historians.

Robert was a deeply religious person, largely due to his mother, Mary Braxton Randolph Carter, a very religious woman

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[2]Letters, Shirley Plantation Collection, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library, Williamsburg, Virginia. Letters cited with only the date are from Robert Carter to Louise Carter; all other letters are more fully referenced.

who wielded great influence within the Carter household. The feminized, evangelical home in which Robert grew up and his evangelical beliefs had an important impact on his identity. Brought up to believe that all human lives were divinely ordained, he had trouble accepting that his life of misery and separation from his family was God's will. Religious doubt and guilt over that doubt pepper Robert's letters. Ten years at sea, away from the South and mixing with northerners, westerners,[3] and foreigners (particularly Europeans), perhaps diluted Robert's "southernness." He could not, however, forget his background entirely, and his discussion of "others," whether western, northern, or foreign, was an attempt to define himself and remain southern.

Robert wrote frequently to Louise, but the style and length of his letters changed between his first and second voyages. Robert's first voyage was to the Pacific Islands, China, and Japan. Since mail was erratic, Robert could only send letters to Louise when a ship left the port he was in for the United States. The cruise involved long periods at sea, sometimes up to three or four months, and during this time Robert wrote his letters in weekly installments that had to

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[3]The "West" of the 1850s was not the "West" of today. Minnesota, Kansas, and Nebraska achieved statehood in the 1850s, so their land formed part of the frontier. Robert's definition of westerners is harder to pin down. The crew contained at least one Texan and one Tennessee native, both of whom, in Robert's opinion, lacked qualities that he associated with the more civilized East.

wait to be mailed until his own vessel hailed a passing ship headed for the United States, or until Robert's ship reached port. Whether written in port or at sea, these letters were long; he usually covered at least eight sides of foolscap paper with very small script. The subject matter varied, depending on whether Robert was at sea or in port. While in port, he wrote descriptive letters; he shared with Louise his impressions of the country--its people, customs, and geography. At sea, however, the letters became more introspective. Robert felt Louise would be bored with descriptions of his mundane life. These letters express his growing dissatisfaction with naval service, but for the most part they convey his homesickness and his affection for his wife and daughter--perhaps because of lack of anything else to write about.

Alternatively, Robert may have used letters to Louise as a way of insulating himself from his environment. He missed his wife and children and so used his letters to construct a domestic haven for himself on board ship. His second voyage took him to South America, where the party mapped the La Plata River and its tributaries. Keeping in contact was far easier, for Robert was rarely more than a few days from a town from where mail could be sent. These letters are shorter, but more frequent.

The nature of the letters varied between the voyages. From the Pacific, Robert and Louise were not able to answer

each other's questions easily--replies could take up to a year to arrive, and Louise rarely knew where to send her husband letters, for he moved around frequently. In South America, however, the mail to the United States was more regular, so husband and wife could respond more easily. Robert no longer spent months at a time away from land, so he was less given to introspection. The letters on the second voyage reflect Robert's greater contentment--with both naval life and his separation from wife and children.

When using letters to reconstruct the past, one must bear in mind that they are frequently shaped by convention. Robert's letters embodied contemporary notions of what a dutiful husband's letters to his wife ought to be. For the most part, these standards would have affected him only subconsciously, but at times Robert worried that he was not fulfilling his husbandly letter-writing obligations satisfactorily. Hearing that one husband was writing hundred-page letters home, Robert half-playfully remarked to Louise:

> I am afraid that I dont love you my precious one as much as he and Habersham do their wives for I am utterly incapable of writing forty pages. . . . Tell me dearest what to write forty pages about that you may not be so far behind your contemporary young wives.[4]

Robert's worries illustrate the danger of using twentieth-century standards to judge past conventions. Although a forty-page letter might be seen as heroic and a sign of true

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[4]Aug. 14, 1854.

devotion today, letters of this length were not exceptional in the nineteenth century, and shorter letters might be judged as half-hearted. Men tended to write longer letters than women, articulating the sentimental ideal that they expected their women to embody.[5] Robert never did manage to write forty pages, but the letters he composed leave no doubt that he loved his wife.

Although the difficulties that white southern women faced in living up to the ideal placed on them by their society have been examined thoroughly, the similar dilemma faced by men has not received such treatment.[6] Robert was expected to be a strong patriarch whose wife and children were subservient to him; he should be at ease in a primarily masculine society. But Robert and Louise's marriage was marked by companionship and shared decisions on childrearing; furthermore, Robert was extremely uncomfortable in his highly masculine shipboard life. His experiences suggest not only that men suffered as much as women in embodying their social ideal, but also that the standard interpretation of southern masculinity should be revised.

In order to understand Robert and the dilemmas that he

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[5]Ellen K. Rothman, Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 11.

[6]See, for example, Anne Firor Scott, The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930 (Chicago, 1970); Catherine Clinton, The Plantation Mistress: Women's World in the Old South (New York, 1982).

faced, this thesis examines his life in three arenas. It begins with an analysis of Robert's life in the navy and how his naval career shaped his character. Isolated from those he loved and from the domestic world in which he felt secure, Robert used his letters to reconstruct his own domestic world on board ship, particularly in his first voyage when so much time was spent at sea. The second section examines the domestic world that Robert constructed and how it changed during the two voyages. The final section is a study of Robert's attitudes toward race, how these views affected and were affected by his attitudes toward class and gender, and the part these notions played in his overall self-construction. Thus, chapter one explores Robert's professional masculinity, chapter two his domestic masculinity, and chapter three his racial masculinity. The thesis explores a fractured and complex set of manly identities in which profession, family history, religion, class, race, and gender are all implicated. Although this is an examination of only one man, the conclusions may be applicable for other antebellum white southern men, suggesting that the prevailing scholarly conventions be subjected to closer scrutiny.

CHAPTER I

"This Unnatural Life"--SHIPBOARD MASCULINITY

One of the most striking aspects of Robert's letters is the degree to which he apparently hated life in the navy, particularly during his first cruise after marriage. The 1853 voyage of the USS Vincennes involved a three-year voyage of exploration to the North Pacific and China Sea--a trading and charting mission. Its route crossed the Atlantic to South Africa, thence to Australia, north to Hong Kong, China, and Japan, and across the Pacific to San Francisco, mapping the islands it visited and trading with the inhabitants. Robert judged his superior officers incompetent, despised life in the officers' mess, and found conditions on board uncomfortable. He continually urged Louise to prevent him from ever going away to sea again once he returned from this voyage. "If I can only remember all this feeling of desolation and disgust when I am being persuaded to leave you again I shall need no other assistance to resist all persuasion."[7] During this period of intense unhappiness, Robert's letters to Louise were a vital insulation against the shipboard life he was forced to endure. Unable to utilize the fraternity and male bonding of the wardroom, Robert used his letters to Louise to maintain

[7]Nov. 8, 1853.

his masculine identity in an all-male environment.

But Robert did return to sea. In 1858, he sailed to South America to take part in the La Plata expedition, which explored the river system from Buenos Aires to Paraguay and Bolivia, and turned down an opportunity to return home early preferring to remain and finish the three year cruise.

Much of Robert's dissatisfaction on his first voyage seemed to stem from the separation from his wife and daughter. He had been to sea for long periods before, but this was the first time he had left behind a wife or a daughter. Even without that burden, life at sea in the nineteenth century was not easy.

The Vincennes was an old ship. Robert was envious of those sailors attached to the fast, modern schooners. On long voyages, when food and water supplies ran low, even fresh rainwater was a luxury. The voyage took the crew through some of the world's most notoriously stormy seas. One feels for Robert when he "had an ugly sea to contend with." "Why," he asked Louise, "need I afflict you with my troubles of seasickness and misery, twas bad enough to suffer it."[8] Robert also experienced extremes of temperature, writing to Louise early on in the voyage:

> You dear one, have no idea of this weather and God grant you never may. Hot weather is sometimes depressing at home but imagine us down in our

[8]Feb. 14, Sep. 15, 1854.

> wardroom all the hatches are covered to keep out the rain two large lamps and several candles burning, and because the hammocks are swung and no place to go but up in the rain, nearly all the mess assembled down here singing and noising to keep cool, the perspiration starting from every pore, a squall every now and then setting the old ship to bumping and pitching into a head sea and driving the rain down the hatches."[9]

Hong Kong in May was so hot that it was "insufferable" below decks until after midnight, but on the China Sea in December, Robert signed off, "God bless you my Best Beloved One I am freezing." Sailing from South Africa to Australia he despaired, "If I wait for a smooth sea and a leisure moment to come together I wont have any letter written this passage." The dangers of naval life were sharply focused in October 1854, when the Vincennes's companion ship, the Porpoise, failed to arrive at their rendezvous after a particularly violent storm. Nothing had been heard of her by December, when Robert felt that "we have but one inference to draw."[10]

The United States Navy of the 1840s and 1850s was in a state of slow reform. Sail was gradually giving way to steam, but (in the face of massive opposition from traditionalists within the naval command) not as quickly as in the British Navy. Within the officer ranks, promotion was by seniority, not by merit, and could be frustratingly slow for ambitious young officers. The Naval Academy at Annapolis was set up in 1845 to provide formal training for midshipmen, and Robert

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[9]Aug. 1, 1853.

[10]May 15, Dec. 30, 1854, Dec. 9, 1853, Oct. 21, Dec. 23, 1854.

Carter was one of the first graduates of the school. Entry into the Academy was by patronage--members of Congress alone could nominate candidates.[11]

The Naval Academy tended to produce homogenous officers. Many came from naval families themselves: navy blood was strong--sons joined the navy, daughters married into it. Although there was little naval tradition in the Carter family, Robert's marriage to Louise began an extended family association with the navy. Louise's sister Eliza also married a naval officer, as did both of Robert's and Louise's daughters. Many of the Annapolis midshipmen conceived of the navy as a calling. Their training there inculcated in them a strong sense of honor and a high respect for order, nationalism, obedience, and rank. There was no fortune to be made in a naval career, but men were assured of eventual promotion to the highest ranks, provided they did not leave the navy, or die prematurely. The strong sense of personal honor encouraged by the navy meant that officers needed achievement and official recognition of that achievement to feel fulfilled. With their personal honor and patriarchal families, naval officers were remarkably similar to elite

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[11]Naval histories abound; see for example: Kenneth J. Hagan, This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power (New York, 1991), Edward L. Beach, The United States Navy: 200 Years (New York, 1986). For a good description of the Naval Academy and the men it produced see Peter Karsten, The Naval Aristocracy: The Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern American Navalism (New York, 1972). The characterization of naval officer that follows is taken largely from Karsten.

white southern men.

Naval fathers were strict disciplinarians. They expected their wives (often women who would increase an officer's social standing) to be patient, uncomplaining, and willing to accept long periods of separation. Although navy wives sometimes returned to their own families while their husbands were at sea, many remained in the naval yards, living among other navy wives in a society virtually devoid of men.

This characterization of naval officers, however, would seem to be remarkably generalized, ideal, and ahistorical. Peter Karsten, a historian of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Navy, argues, however, that "this virtually timeless 'ideal type' of naval officer actually existed. In an era of considerable social change the naval aristocracy was a strikingly homogeneous socio-professional group, with a remarkably stable pattern of thought and behavior."[12]

In some respects, Robert was similar to this "ideal type" of naval officer. Like the majority of naval men, Robert was opposed to the idea of taking women to sea. The first and third lieutenants on the voyage to South America took their wives with them, and this caused Robert considerable annoyance. He was frustrated by the inconvenience caused by having to cater to "the girls." Accommodation had to be found for them while their husbands explored upriver, and Robert felt that their husbands spent time with their wives that

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[12]Naval Aristocracy, xiv.

should have been spent at work, although he confessed to Louise that were she there, his views might have been different. However, in general, Robert thought that "wives of Officers of the Navy may always be certain of one thing, that they do their husbands more harm than good by accompanying them on cruises." Robert was sure that "ladies are very useful things in their place," but also that their place was not at sea where they distracted not only their husbands, but also the whole crew from its duties.[13]

But in many respects, Robert appears to vary considerably from the typical naval officer described by Karsten. His letters show that he exhibited certain characteristics common to his peers--his attitude toward women at sea, his need for recognition, and his strong sense of honor (although this sometimes conflicted with the naval idea of honor). But he was not a strong disciplinarian at home, he did not enjoy the enforced masculine shipboard life, preferring the company of his wife and children, and he had far stronger religious beliefs than the "typical" naval officer--whoever he was.

Robert's misery at being at sea is most apparent during his first voyage. He was forced to leave behind a wife and infant daughter before establishing a strong relationship with either of them. His distress was heightened by the serious problems that plagued the 1853-1855 expedition. Captain

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[13]June 17, May 24, July 15, 1858.

Cadwalader Ringgold had been instructed to establish trading links in the Pacific, but this expedition suffered from being in the shadow of the extremely successful Perry expedition to Japan. Commodore Matthew Perry had just concluded treaty negotiations with the Japanese which had opened up Japan to the rest of the world. Ringgold was unpopular with the men under his command. Robert felt he was being made to do the jobs of several men with little appreciation for his efforts. Tension built up rapidly; Robert wrote to Louise that "every one in the ship is growling and discontented."[14] He felt the unease was exacerbated by Ringgold who, in Robert's view, appeared to show little skill at management. After a particularly hazardous passage, Robert wrote that:

> The Commander having perhaps little else to do since we got out of the very bad weather has been stirring every body up with a long pole instead of letting people have a little rest after so much bad weather in fact many begin to wish for more gales to get clear of the internal storm that is always brewing and raging.[15]

The crisis came to a head in Hong Kong where Ringgold apparently went mad (although it may have been a particularly virulent fever) and was relieved of command. Robert remained pessimistic about the expedition. He told Louise that "I am amply disgusted and give up all hope of anything but discord and failure which last I wish for speedily to end the

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[14]Sep. 13, 1853.

[15]Dec. 15, 1853.

bother."[16]

On his first cruise, Robert does not seem to have got on well with his fellow officers, who he felt were lazy and too fond of drinking and attending parties. Robert, in contrast, did not enjoy an active social life and often elected to remain on board and keep watch rather than go out to a ball or dinner party when the ship was in port. He found "the entertaining of guests . . . upon the first meeting of a large squadron . . . an incessant labor," described dinners as a "particular abhorrence," and claimed to "prefer anything to attending [a] Ball." He was highly critical of the heavy drinking that occurred. He realized that the continual toils inherent in a life at sea led many sailors to drink,[17] but was angry when his messmates' drinking habits led to more work for him:

> Bachus [sic] took possession of one Wardroom and turned me out of it to keep the watch of Lieutenants in beastly intoxication. I would not thus expose my messmates if I hadnt lost all respect for them by their not being at all ashamed of it next day, and to shew you how man tends to the beast when restraint is taken off.[18]

Robert had difficulty participating in the recreational aspects of the wardroom. He did not enjoy the male

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[16]Aug. 24, 1854. For more detail on the Ringgold expedition see Gordon K. Harrington "The Ringgold Incident: A Matter of Judgement," in Clayton R. Barrow Jr., America Spreads Her Sails: U. S. Seapower in the 19th Century (Annapolis, 1973), 100-111.

[17]May 15, Aug. 14, 1854, Sep. 30, 1853, May 15, 1854, Aug. 20, 1853.

[18]Dec. 30, 1854.

camaraderie and concomitant bawdiness of his fellow officers. He wanted to distance himself from the uncouth characteristics of these men and thus used animalistic language to describe them. He used similar language when referring to indigenous people he encountered, whom he felt were uncivilized. Equating drunk officers with uncivilized people, Robert implicitly defined himself as civilized.

Robert's aversion to drink and to a male-dominated social life contrasts sharply with the popular picture of antebellum southern men. Significant gender separation characterizes this interpretation of white southern society. Although there were occasions when the two sexes came together, men and women generally enjoyed separate social lives. Alcohol abuse appears to have been prevalent among southern men, although women who "partook of anything stronger than a sweet wine risked loss of respectability." Robert was typical in that he despised women who drank but unusual in that he also despised men who drank to excess even in exclusively male situations. Although in this case Robert was rejecting the naval drinking tradition that encouraged fraternity, he perhaps also rejected the male camaraderie that was an important factor in the lives of other southern men.[19]

Robert's dislike of the "unnatural life" he was forced to lead distinguishes him most strongly from this

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[19]Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, esp. 272-291. Robert's religious background may have included a strong temperance element that was popular in Jacksonian America, see Ch. 2.

interpretation of southern men. Robert felt uncomfortable living "always or nearly all the time with men, and men with whom you have no ties but those of interest and most of whom despise each other." Not only did Robert not enjoy his male-dominated world but he also felt that when men gathered together their worst character traits were manifest. "The fact is that though man is a gregarious animal men alone should never be allowed to herd at all for then the animal is all that appears." Robert clearly believed that, left unchecked, men exhibited bestial characteristics, implying that women had a calming, domesticating, civilizing, and moral effect on men. To him, the domestic world of women represented civilization and culture, whereas an exclusively male environment was more barbaric.[20]

Robert felt crushed by the constant demands and tedium of naval life:

> Any man on shore no matter how menial his occupation or how many bosses he has during the week, has Saturday night with his family and after each days work, no matter how much fault has been found with him during the day goes home at night to forget his troubles with one who sympathizes and consoles. But with us; how different! The evenings are no better than the days you are always within reach of the odious discipline.[21]

Robert's longing for the domestic world of his family is clear in the letters. He desired the autonomy that he felt life in the domestic sphere would give him. Unable to bond with his

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[20]Aug. 14, Oct. 7, 1854.

[21]Aug. 20, 1853.

peers on board ship he could not draw on the hyper-masculine atmosphere of shipboard life for masculine identity. He used his letters therefore to construct his own masculinity, drawing especially on attributes from the domestic world in which he was more comfortable.

The identification of the public world with men and the domestic world of the household with women is perhaps more characteristic of northern than of southern culture. In the ideology of northern bourgeois society, work and home were separate, thus allowing "separate spheres" for men and women. The home was a haven for men from the pressures of the outside world. Prescriptive literature of the time reinforced this ideology. Women were portrayed as naturally more nurturing and sympathetic than men, and the home, under their feminine influence, offered moral, spiritual, and emotional solace to husbands.[22]

The notion of separate spheres did not apply as fully to the ideology of the South, however, where the dominance of men over women was an essential feature of slave society. Although opinions differ radically over the extent to which women were subjugated, few would argue that in the South work and home were separated to the same extent that they were in the North. In the South, where the economy was still

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[22]Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York, 1990), esp. 142-163.

primarily agrarian, the planter's position as head of his family meant that he still wielded some influence over the household. Work that went on within the household was recognized as such. By contrast, in the North, housework held little value for men, and, often, for women also.

In both the North and the South, women were thought to exert a calming, moral force on men, and a woman's role as mother was especially important. But where North and South differed was the location of the spheres. In northern ideology an attempt was made to separate home and work, family life and public life; Southerners, however, "did not view either families or households as primarily female preserves, but as terrain that contained women's sphere." Robert's view of the home as a haven to escape the outside world is perhaps more northern than southern.[23]

So where did Robert's view come from? Recent work argues

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[23]Quote from Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household, 195.The debate over the patriarchal nature of southern society and the subjugation of women has aroused the most controversy in studies of the region. Catherine Clinton characterizes white women as the "slave of slaves" in The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South (New York, 1982), whereas Jane Censer rarely, if ever, uses the word "patriarchy" in her North Carolina Planters and their Children, 1800-1860 (Baton Rouge, La., 1984). For the differences between attitudes toward household work in the North and the South, see in particular, Boydston, Home and Work, and Fox-Genovese, Within the Plantation Household. Recently, the idea of separate spheres has come under attack. Although few would dispute that such ideology was prevalent in the North, in practice, men and women were involved in each other's worlds. The "spheres" were not as separate as has previously been argued, see especially Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," Journal of American History, LXXV (1988-89), 9-39.

that the idea of the family and the domestic world as providing an escape from the turmoil of the outside world was already prevalent in the South by the early 1800s.[24] Such views were also common in evangelical ideology.[25] Robert's conception of the home as a haven suggests that such ideology may not have been unique to the North.

In his letters, Robert concocted a fantasy of living in privacy with his family in a log cabin in Arkansas.[26] They could "commence a backwood life . . . growing cotton. We might make a living, small, at first, but as the country grows we would be more comfortable. I think of this sometimes but my heart fails me when I think of you living in a log house. Oh I wish we were rich." Robert did not really want to live in Arkansas; he believed frontier culture to be uncivilized. Arkansas, however, suggested notions of isolation; Robert was constructing a safe haven from the outside world and situating it on the frontier offered physical as well as mental isolation.[27]

Robert's belief that he had to be a provider are clear.

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[24]Jan Lewis, The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia (Cambridge, 1983), Daniel Blake-Smith, Inside the Great House: Planter Life in Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake Society (Ithaca, N. Y., 1980), Censer, North Carolina Planters.

[25]Discussion of evangelicalism follows in Ch. 2.

[26]Robert's desire to live in Arkansas may shed some light on his conception of the West. Log cabins epitomized the frontier in Jacksonian America.

[27]Oct. 10, 1853.

For economic reasons, if for nothing else, he was tied to a life in the navy. "My precious ones what would I do to support you for the years which the apprenticeship of another profession would occupy [?]" Although he was a member of a wealthy family, Robert did not have the means to support his family himself unless he worked, and a naval career was all he was qualified to follow.[28] He was less concerned, however, with the loss of material comforts than with how society would view him if he could not provide for his family. He felt that if he left the navy, he would be "depriving [Louise] of the means to procure comforts essential to [her] health." Yet a man who could not afford to support his wife and children would be derided by society. A husband's responsibility to provide for his wife and children was an important part of southern manhood; Robert felt that he would not measure up as a man if he forced his family to live below the standards to which they were accustomed. Such a failure would be a severe blow to the pride of a man who was already suffering from low self-esteem.[29]

Robert appears to have suffered constantly from homesickness. He viewed his letters to Louise as cathartic: "it is in pouring out my complaints to you that I find comfort and when I can't do so in person, by letter is all that is

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[28]Oct. 10, 1853, July 1, 1854.

[29]Apr. 15, 1854.

left to me."[30] At times despair overwhelmed him totally:

> I am utterly unfit for any work in my profession, it is a melancholy fact. I try to reason myself into contentment, upbraid myself for want of manliness, and on the score of expediency try to accommodate myself to the life, but it is of no use to try, there is a void that it can <u>not</u> fill I want something to love and there is nothing in the navy to love scarcely anything to like and much disgusting and detestable.[31]

This is perhaps one of the most telling parts of Robert's letters to Louise during his 1853-1855 expedition. Why did Robert consider himself wanting in "manliness?" No doubt he regretted his continual voyages into homesickness. He apologized continually to Louise for his "growling" letters and tried to argue to himself that his misery was justifiable.[32] He even went so far as to find a medical condition to explain his distress. "The doctors call it nostralgia and say it sometimes affects people so seriously that they have to be sent home." By giving his homesickness a medical name (however similar to nostalgia!) and grounding it with a physician's expert opinion, Robert justified his homesickness to himself. Yet, he went on, "these cases occur only among the Swiss and a few other nations no case ever having been recorded as happening among Yankees"![33] Robert's

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[30]Jan. 31, 1855.

[31]Oct. 7, 1854.

[32]May 15, 1854; for justification of misery, see, for example, Feb. 17, Aug. 19, 21, 1854.

[33]Nov. 8, 1853.

use of "Yankee" to mean an American, rather than a Northerner, is in direct contrast to the vast majority of Southerners, whose use of the term in the 1850s pointed to the heightened sectionalism of the period. It may indicate the extent to which Robert's southern identity was fading.

Robert's upbringing would have taught him that men did not wallow in self-pity, and his constant lapses worried him. "I am so desperately homesick. I can't get over it though I know it is wrong." He was also concerned that his moaning upset his wife. Although Robert's pain at separation and his longing for home may not in itself have been unusual among men, the articulation of these feelings was, he felt, a weakness and showed a "want of manliness." His mother was a strong influence in his childhood, and now Robert felt he was too attached to his wife. Perhaps Robert believed that his reliance upon these two women weakened his masculinity.[34]

The "void" that the navy could not fill was clearly the domestic realm that Robert craved. Robert's southern upbringing stressed the separate social worlds of men and women and thus he saw his own need to be with his wife and child, rather than with his fellow officers, as atypical masculine behavior. To Robert, the desire to immerse himself in the domestic, female world rather than the male seafaring culture that surrounded him could have been, to him, further evidence of his "want of manliness."

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[34]Aug. 19, 1854, Jan. 31, 1855.

An idea of what Robert defined as "manliness" can be gleaned from his letters. Robert was worried about becoming more like his peers aboard ship, and therefore it may be that those characteristics he most despised in navy men, such as drunken and debauched behavior, were the antithesis of what he believed a gentleman should be. He was concerned not only about his perceived lack of manliness, but also that he was losing his gentility in the navy. To an elite Southerner, such loss of class was disastrous. Robert was concerned that the navy was eroding his power of independent thought; he warned Louise that "if we ever meet again you will have to do all the thinking. I have no more a will of my own." Loss of autonomy and independence was a serious challenge to a southern gentleman. There was "a want of tone" and of "finer feelings" in the navy, according to Robert. "The mere fact of a mans belonging to the Navy now-adays is sufficient to render him in my eyes an object of suspicion and an avoidable person. I will never trust another till I have known him." Robert's fear of losing "tone," "finer feelings," and trustworthiness suggest that these were qualities he felt necessary in a gentleman.[35] Robert was not only concerned at his lack of manliness, but also that the navy was eroding his class and gentility.

The masculine identity that Robert constructed for

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[35]May 11, 1854; Robert Carter to Eliza Marcy, Apr. 9, 1854 (enclosed in Robert's Mar. 27, 1854, letter to Louise); Aug. 14, 1854.

himself through his letters thus rejected those aspects of naval life that he abhorred--the drinking, male camaraderie, boorishness, and lack of refinement. Instead, he drew upon Virginian notions of gentility and class. Robert's professional masculinity was influenced to a great extent by the domestic world for which he longed.

Robert's decision to go back to sea in 1858 is surprising in light of his vehement dislike of navy life. He had spent two years at the Norfolk Naval Yard, however, and time may have lessened the memories of the hardships of the first expedition. To a great extent, he had no choice about returning. As he had constantly lamented in the earlier voyage, he was educated only for a life in the navy. But his letters home on the second voyage were very different from those written during the first.

Many of the circumstances that had made the first voyage so intolerable were not present on the second and that Robert was much happier on this cruise is clear from his letters. The charting expedition in South America did not require three-month long passages. Robert had little idle time to dwell on his misery. He enjoyed the countryside and climate of South America and found the expedition "a less intolerable manner of passing three years than a cruise at sea would be." Although he still grumbled about the incompetency of his superiors and the folly of the expedition from time to time,

he was able to laugh about the discomforts.[36] Perhaps most important, the mail was regular, and so Robert was able to keep in contact with his family at home. Whereas replies to letters from China could take up to a year to come, in South America, replies could be received in about two or three months.

Robert's relative contentedness is illustrated by his decision, one year into the cruise, not to return home when offered the chance, but to finish the three years in South America. "Whats the use of breaking a cruise," he wrote to Louise, "just to get three months leave and then be ordered off, and have all the parting over again." Although still desperately homesick, Robert was more pragmatic about separation from his wife and daughters. "I am sometimes half crazy to be with you," he wrote to Louise, "but ah! whats the use of grunting?"[37]

During his first voyage Robert tried to construct his relationship with Louise through his letters, attempting to build the foundation that would have been growing were they not separated. He assured her that she was rarely out of his mind, that he dreamt about her frequently, and that "so long as we are sure of each others love we shall be consoled for any minor trial." Robert wrote pages of protestations of love. Separated for three years after only eighteen months

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[36]Jul. 7, 1859.

[37]Feb. 22, 1859, June 17, 1858.

of marriage, Robert and Louise had been unable to form as strong a foundation for their marriage as couples who were not separated. Robert admitted that on the day of their marriage, he had "slight misgivings lest we should not be entirely suited to each other though I knew we both loved. But now most beloved One all that is sure." Sure or not, through his letters, Robert attempted to convince both himself and Louise that their marriage contained all the necessary ingredients for permanent happiness.[38]

The two years spent together at Norfolk, however, had reassured Robert that his marriage was indeed successful. He still wrote Louise adoringly from South America, but not in such great quantity, for now, he assured her, "our devotion to each other is so perfectly understood by both that it seems superfluous to write much about it." Perhaps this was a convenient excuse for writing shorter letters, but Robert apparently loved his wife no less on this cruise than he had on the first. Confidence in his marriage, was a major reason for Robert's comparative contentment on his second voyage. He still craved the security of domestic life, but the conditions of the second cruise allowed him to escape from the all-male environment he had so hated on his first cruise.[39]

This is not to suggest that Robert had changed dramatically between the two cruises. As on the first cruise,

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[38]May 29, 1854.

[39]Feb. 3, 1859.

Robert was still exasperated by inefficiency. His party was forced to wait for nearly a year in Buenos Aires for the Commander of the expedition to arrive from his previous duties. Fed up with the delay, Robert was "afraid this expedition will be a sillier one than the last."[40]

Robert also remained concerned about the effect the navy was having on his character. He became convinced that "vanity is the chief incentive and support of naval life." Robert recognized that naval officers needed praise, recognition, and reward for their work, but his religious beliefs taught him that vanity was a sin. He went on: "I look with distrust on my corps rarely expecting and more rarely finding a man whose wisdom I can respect or whose opinion I would value." The fear of losing vital qualities of character in the navy remained with Robert on his second voyage. He still questioned his manliness in South America: "It is doubtless unmanly to pine for home and it may make an officer less efficient to have a domestic character, but I do long to be once more at mine and cant deny that my tastes are very domestic."[41] Secure in his domestic life, as he had not been on the first voyage, he was better able to deal with the hardships of his naval life.

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[40]Aug. 1858.

[41]July 15, 1858. Kenneth S. Greenberg examines antebellum concepts of honor in "The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South," American Historical Review, VC (1990), 57-74; July 15, 1858.

Robert's construction of his professional masculinity relied strongly on the domestic world that he craved. His fears of losing his manliness were exacerbated by his worry about being too reliant on the female support of his mother and then his wife. The domestic world to which Robert wanted to escape was itself a construction in his mind, given substance through his letters. Separated from the home in reality, it became an idealized sanctuary in his letters, a haven that he could control and rule as the patriarch he was unable to be on board ship.

CHAPTER II

"God Help You to Bring That Child Up in His Way"

DOMESTIC MASCULINITY

Robert's early life and childhood at Shirley help to explain the internal dilemmas that he suffered, particularly on the first voyage--his perceived lack of manliness, his need to support his family, his unhappiness with shipboard life. Family life in the 1830s-1850s at Shirley was not particularly stable. (Louise's sister Eliza Marcy characterized her sister's in-laws as "afflicted"![42]) Robert's parents, Hill Carter and Mary Braxton Randolph Carter, were engaged in a power struggle. At Shirley, Mary Carter's domestic and evangelical authority had triumphed over Hill Carter's patriarchal authority. Thus, Robert was raised in an essentially feminine domestic environment; to a lesser degree than most elite southerners, he experienced traditional masculine authority based on patriarchy. Robert's construction of authority in his own family--which included Louise, Alice, and Marion by 1858--was influenced by the models of authority that he had experienced at Shirley and was centered around evangelical ideas filtered through the lens of southern patriarchy.

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[42]Eliza Marcy to Samuel Marcy, Dec. 1855.

Robert's attitude toward childcare, like his view of the home as a haven from the outside world, was at odds with the general interpretation of southern men, which portrays the influence of elite southern fathers as distant during early childhood, becoming more involved as children reached their teens. Robert played a major part in his children's early upbringing--at least as much as he could long-distance. His attitude was by no means exceptional, suggesting perhaps that this explanation should be revised.[43]

In the 1850s, Robert's mother left her husband, Hill, for a period of time and this may not have been the first time she did so.[44] In January 1849, Mary Carter received an essay on the subject of a wife's leaving her husband for his adultery from the Reverend N. A. Okeson in response to her "touching appeal" to him. Okeson argued that marriage was like any other contract, and that if one partner defaulted, it was the injured party's "privilege" to leave. He assured Mary that she would be breaking none of God's laws by leaving her husband, for Hill Carter had "violated the law of chastity" and stood "before God with the dark and damnable stain of perjury upon him." Yet Okeson also told her that her

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[43]Robert's attitudes were different from those outlined by Wyatt-Brown in Southern Honor, 117-148. They were similar to those outlined by Censer, North Carolina Planters, and Lewis, Pursuit of Happiness.

[44]Letters between Mary Carter and Robert, also letters between Louise, Eliza and Samuel Marcy and Marion Humphreys, in Dec. 1855 and Jan. 1856.

Christian duty compelled her to stay with her husband to try to bring him back to a Christian way of life. If she chose this course of action she should, however, make sure that her children were left in no doubt as to the sin of adultery, that is was "a violation of a command of God by whomsoever committed" (his emphasis).[45]

Robert's letters to Louise suggest that Mary, remaining married, did a thorough job of convincing her children of their father's sin. With the exception of Robert, Hill Carter was ostracized by his children. Hill was fond of Louise and Alice, and Robert was "so glad" that Louise didn't "join with my brothers and sisters in the system they carry out of shunning Papa." Hill appeared a distant and forbidding father to his children, but Robert believed that the "chief cause" of his father's unpleasant manner was "the bearing the whole family maintain[ed] toward him." The reasons for Robert's relative leniency toward his father compared to that of his siblings' are difficult to discover, but he was away at sea when Mary received her advice from Okeson and was not at home during the scandal and its aftermath.[46]

Robert was strongly influenced by his mother's pious

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[45]Okeson, Jan. 30, 1849. Extensive research unearthed no biographical details about Okeson. He was a family friend, both Robert and his sister Lizzie Hill Carter mention him in their correspondence.

[46]July 2, 1854.

Christianity, however, and religion played an important part in Robert's life, to a degree unusual in naval men. Many sailors had difficulty in reconciling strong religious beliefs with the experience of life at sea in which the elements played such a major part. Although some developed respect for nature at sea, others resorted to elaborate superstitious beliefs that were incompatible with institutional religion. Sailors tended to be spiritual rather than religious. Robert's traditional religious views, and the ardency with which he held them seem to be the exception rather than the norm.

Regular religious worship was difficult to carry out at sea. "The ship was an environment where work, activity, and self-help necessarily took precedence over religious meditation or supplication." Some of the larger naval vessels had chaplains, but on many, this office was nominally carried out by the captain, whose idea of a religious service was not always standard. Robert complained that one Sunday, instead of a service, the crew was treated to "a speech from the Commander or rather extracts from his instructions, and the rules + regulations."[47] Although Robert tried to keep Sunday as a day of rest, he rarely managed it, since duties on board ship had to take priority.

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[47]Marcus Rediker, Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750 (Cambridge, 1987), quote from 169, for more detail on religion at sea, see 169-179, also Karsten, Naval Aristocracy, 73-74. Robert's view , Jan. 23, 1854.

Robert had problems in reconciling his religion with his career. He missed his wife and child terribly and prayed "constantly to be enabled to bear up against it." He knew that when he and Louise thought "of the many many mercies and blessings we receive from God we ought not to repine" at their separation, "but I am sometimes doubtful that this is the pleasure of God." Robert found it hard to believe that a caring God would subject him to the pain he felt away from his family. Particularly when at sea on long voyages he puzzled and anguished over his dilemma. He chastised himself that he was not "sufficiently confident of Gods protection" but nevertheless often found it difficult to gain comfort from his faith, which was severely tested while at sea. "Christians ought to be able to console themselves with their meditations and hopes," he wrote, "but I cant."[48]

Robert worked hard at trying to understand his dilemma, and at the start of his second voyage, he wrote a long letter to Louise about how "our present affliction should be received and what may be gained or at least learned from it." He decided that living at home, he scarcely felt the need of God, for he was so content. Companionate marriage and domesticity had taken the place of religious identity and activity. Separation meant that Louise and he could no longer rely solely on each other and must therefore turn to God. He doubted that "even the proper employments and permitted

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[48]Aug. 8, 1853, Aug. 24, 1854.

enjoyments of earth are the chief ends for which man was created. . . . Was I not living in utter lethargy so far as my Christian duty was concerned? Was I doing good to any of my race?" Robert felt that he had not yet succeeded in accomplishing the task for which God had put him on earth, and perhaps this was why he was being sent to South America.[49]

Like the majority of elite white Virginians, Robert was probably an Episcopalian, but he may have been of an evangelical temperament. He went to an Episcopalian school before joining the navy; moreover, Louise's father was President of an Episcopalian college, and Robert seems to have had no denominational disputes with her. Although it is impossible to be totally certain, Robert exhibited several characteristics that suggest his evangelical leanings. His disapproval of excessive drinking, his dislike of balls and parties, and his discomfort with working on the Sabbath, all suggest an evangelical sensibility. Furthermore, the comfort Robert drew from the domestic world may have stemmed from evangelical views.[50]

Robert's views about slavery were influenced by evangelical thought. He believed that slaveholders were responsible for the education and care of their slaves.

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[49]Mar. 15, 1858.

[50]Following discussion of evangelicalism taken from Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South (Chicago, Ill., 1977). Mathews examined the values and institutions of evangelicalism, which crossed denominational boundaries--thus Robert's possible position as an evangelical Episcopalian.

Robert had a low opinion of the morals of the Shirley slave community but thought their immorality stemmed from inattention: "they have been sadly neglected by all of us except mamma and who knows how much of their short coming may be laid to our charge by a judge that sees everything in its proper light." Like many southern evangelicals, Robert did not believe that slavery was wrong but did believe that it was his duty to ensure that the lives of his slaves were improved by converting them to Christianity.

A major part of evangelicalism was the importance placed on the family, which was "the foundation of Christian piety, knowledge, and solidarity." During the nineteenth century, the home, rather than the church, became the focal point of worship. It was a sanctuary and retreat from the outside world. The home was particularly important as the site where children were educated for adulthood. The importance attached to the home meant that women became primarily responsible for family religion, and especially responsible for the religious nurture of children. Robert believed that "correct religious and moral principles may be instilled from the very moment that the imbecility of the infant disappears." He wrote to Louise that "I never cease to pray for you in this responsible station, that you may be taught and strengthened." The education of children is the area in which Robert's evangelical ideas can be seen most clearly but it is also an

area on which he diverged sharply from Southern practice.[51]

Born days shy of her parents' nine-month wedding anniversary, Alice Carter was probably premature (even if only by a few days). Louise was apparently seriously ill after the birth, since it took her two months to recover enough to travel with Robert to show off their, as yet unnamed, new granddaughter to her grandparents at Shirley. Robert's letters are full of the pride experienced by new parents--"she must be an eighth wonder"--tempered by regret and frustration that he could not see his daughter growing up.[52] Alice's sister, Marion, was born during Robert's posting to the shipyard at Norfolk, Virginia.

Robert felt that family affairs should be kept firmly within the private realm. They were part of the domestic sphere that he constructed for himself through his letters. He was angered by his fellow officers when they inquired about his wife and daughter.

> One of the mess was coarse enough to remark that I had never celebrated my wedding day, and no doubt thought he was doing an agreeable thing in asking the "birth day of the young one". . . . I wonder if he really thought I would like to talk of you at the mess table or even at any time <u>tell</u> <u>him</u> the birthday of our little <u>God</u> <u>Gift</u>.[53]

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[51]Mathews, <u>Religion in the Old South,</u> esp. 98-101, quote on 44. Robert to Louise, Sept. 2, 1853.

[52]Sept. 30, Sept. 2, May 20, 1854.

[53]Oct. 14, 1854.

Alice's birth less than nine months after her parents' wedding left Louise and Robert open to charges of pre-marital sex. Although Alice was born only days before the nine-month anniversary, and was almost certainly premature, Robert was sensitive to any suspicions regarding the timing of his daughter's birth. Such sensitiveness was probably intensified by his father's philandering. This may well have been the reason Robert reacted so defensively to any questioning about his family.

Mid-nineteenth-century custom, in both the North and the South, dictated that mothers were responsible for the upbringing of their children.[54] The rearing of Alice and Marion is one of the principal themes of Robert's letters. Robert's attitude toward his children's care changed, though, between his two voyages. In June 1853, Robert left behind a nine-month old daughter; it was difficult for him, therefore, to have any real effect on her upbringing. Since he had no experience and little opportunity for direct contact, he was able only to tell Louise of his theories on childraising. By the time he returned, Alice was four and father and daughter had to forge a relationship as if they were strangers. When Robert left for sea again in 1858, he had far more experience at being a father. He had spent two years at home acting in that role and would have learned from Louise all that he had missed of his daughter's early childhood. When he returned

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[54]See especially, Lewis, The Pursuit of Happiness.

to sea, he left behind another infant daughter, but early childhood was no longer an abstract concept. From South America, Robert could advise on the practicalities of childcare rather than merely theorize as he had been forced to do previously. During her father's second voyage, Alice learned to read, and Robert could influence her directly through letters, rather than indirectly through Louise. Finally, in 1860, just before Robert returned home, he received his elder daughter's first letter.

Robert's religious views informed his childraising attitudes strongly. He prayed regularly that not only Louise "be taught and strengthened" to bring the children up "in the right way," but also that God "help us both to do our duty" in caring for their children. As a pious Christian, Robert knew that his "duty" was to ensure that his children also grew up knowing the value of piety: "God grant that they may be Christians indeed," he wrote to Louise. He was able to instill Christian values in Alice directly through his letters to her.[55]

Robert constantly reminded Louise of the responsibility she held--"You only are responsible for what she becomes"--and envied her the "glorious opportunity to study the development of human nature." One wonders what the effect of this burden was on Louise. She had to cope with wondering how her absent husband would judge her efforts. Robert's belief

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[55]Mar. 11, Mar. 15, 1858, Mar. 17, 1859.

that "sailors are hardly to be considered responsible for the character of their children reared during their absence," while fair, meant that if Alice grew up a difficult child, it would be Louise's fault. Robert would have been more involved in Alice's upbringing had he been living at home. He wrote to his wife, "How richly we may be repaid in future years for our attention now and how awfully punished in our old age for neglect . . . would I could go and help you."[56] Robert's desire to involve himself in his daughter's early upbringing lends weight to Jane Censer's assertion that family life in the nineteenth-century South saw both parents involved fully, as opposed to Wyatt-Brown and Clinton who argue that fathers became involved in their children's lives only when the children approached youth.[57]

Robert's relationship with his parents may also have convinced him of the need to play a prominent role in the children's upbringing. His mother's evangelicalism led him to realize the importance of early education of children. Furthermore, Robert disliked his siblings' shunning of their father, and he was anxious to ensure that his own children never treated him in that way. Hill did not provide his children with a moral example, but Robert was determined that Alice and Marion should get from him what he had not had from

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[56]Apr. 9, Mar. 11, Nov. 18, 1854, Jan. 18, 1855 (my emphasis).

[57]North Carolina Planters, Southern Honor, Plantation Mistress.

his own father. Robert articulated his concerns about their daughters' upbringing to his wife; he was especially anxious that the girls learn obedience. Robert's first letter to his elder daughter reminded her that God is all-knowing and that Alice must therefore "try to do nothing but what you think he would like." He was reassured to learn from Louise that Alice was "such a good and sensible child" but was apprehensive "about Marions firm and wilful disposition," seeing in it problems for the future. "Perfect obedience in a child is not only a great charm," he wrote to Louise, "but I doubt if any other grace can be instilled by the parents without it." Robert clearly expected, or hoped for, submissiveness in his daughters. Perhaps this was because they were girls, and he wished them to live up to the southern ideal of passive womanhood. His description of a future brother-in-law as having been a "quiet gentlemanly boy . . . above most of the silly and disagreeable ways so common to school boys," however, suggests that he approved of obedience in children of both sexes. His notions of obedience in children owed more to his evangelicalism than to more general southern attitudes toward childraising.[58]

Unable to exert direct paternal authority over his daughters and worried that he would become an absentee parent, like his own father, Robert had to construct parental control

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[58]RC to Alice Carter, June 15, 1858; to Louise, Apr. 16, 1860, Oct. 30, 1859.

through his letters. He believed that the values instilled in the early years were very important and thus tried to ensure that his daughters learned the importance of Christianity from a young age not only through their mother's teaching and example, but also from him.

Robert's views on childcare were fairly advanced for the time. When Marion was seriously ill with pneumonia, he believed that part of the cause was "the style of dressing" children and that "it may be advisable to introduce a fashion of dress which will cover the bosom and shoulders, so as to guard against a return of Marions sickness." He linked the ill health of many American women to childhood attacks of pneumonia and its "permanent effect upon the lungs."[59]

He was violently opposed to using threats or conjuring evil characters to frighten children into obedience or to keep them out of mischief, believing that such treatment could inflict an "age of torment" on young children. "Thats all humbug about it being constitutional with some people to be afraid of ghosts, Dark &c . . . I dont think I could keep my murderous hands off anyone whom I caught frightening our child in that way."[60] This sentiment is at odds with the idea that in the South, childcare was designed to impose ideas of honor from an early age. Children were guided by "reins of guilt and shame," and physical discipline was used. Robert's

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[59]Mar. 17, 1859.

[60]Oct. 31, 1853.

theories of childcare, on the other hand, maintained that children were guided through early inculcation of self-discipline and conscience. Wyatt-Brown suggests these views were shared by a small number of southern evangelicals, who showed little difference from middle-class Northerners. Perhaps, however, such attitudes were more common than he would believe.[61]

Interpretations of elite southern childhood generally argue that many southern children were allowed to run wild. Southern emphasis on, and pride in, the independence of their children led parents to allow them a large degree of freedom. But the "bemused indulgence [and] pride in aggressiveness" that characterized southern parenthood resulted in "distracted childcare."[62] Robert, however, disagreed with this practice and wrote to Louise "how richly we may be repaid in future years for our attention now and how awfully punished in our old age for neglect or as it is sometimes called 'indulgence' now of our offspring."[63]

Affected by prevailing ideas, Robert deferred to Louise's role as the more capable parent. But he did not give up his responsibilities as a father, discussing specific aspects of

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[61]Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor, 117-148.

[62]Ibid., 117-148. This interpretation, however, is not universal, see, for example, Censer, North Carolina Planters, and Lewis, Pursuit of Happiness.

[63]Jan. 18, 1855.

the children's upbringing with Louise. He was unwilling to relinquish authority over his children. His construction of himself through his letters as a patriarchal figure was an important part of his masculinity, particularly as this was an area in which his own father was weak. Robert's lamentation that he was incapable of writing Louise "long homilies on the nurture of children" appears in fact to have been an unnecessary concern. When Louise asked him if he had any views on Alice's being sent to dancing school, Robert responded with a long observation on the folly of such action. Not only was he unsure of the merits of dancing (he believed it "to be more injurous to health than beneficial"), but he feared dancing might become a "dangerous fascination" for Alice. He acknowledged that dancing was "a beautiful accomplishment," but if Alice went to dancing school he worried that dancing would "become a passion which it would be well to restrain" in her. While advising that they both "wait a few years" until making a final decision, Robert nevertheless told Louise that "if your heart is set upon it I could not refuse my consent."[64] His disapproval of dancing schools aside, Robert's letter illustrates how he attempted to retain some influence on his children's upbringing when far away, while ultimately deferring to Louise's decision. The

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[64]Oct. 13, 1859. Robert's real aversion was to dancing schools, not to dancing. Unlike southern Baptists, for example, he did not disapprove of dancing itself; see Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790 (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1982), especially 301-302.

letter was one of the last he wrote to Louise before returning home, so it is impossible to know whether she took his advice.

On another occasion, however, Louise ignored her husband's wishes and followed her own judgement. Of great concern to Robert was the hiring of a nurse--a matter that took over a year of correspondence between husband and wife. Robert felt his wife needed help looking after the children and urged Louise to replace the young slave woman she had hired with "a good old 'Aunt somebody,' free or slave, (the last preferably)." Louise, however, was happy with Susan, one of the Shirley slaves, and clearly told her husband so.[65]

Robert replied to his wife that she should "certainly keep Susan if you like her and have no compunctions about taking a valuable servant away from Shirley as I must confess I have, seeing we already get as much from there as any other of the boys." From South America there was little Robert could do directly to affect the hiring process, so he attempted to use guilt to prevent Louise hiring a slave from Shirley--a slave community that Robert felt was riddled with immorality.[66] This tactic did not work, however, and Robert was finally forced to acknowledge defeat:

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[65]Sept. 15, 1858. Robert's characterization of old black women as safe corresponds to the "Mammy" image, discussed by Deborah Gray White in Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York, 1987).

[66]Mar. 30, 1859.

> You had better not be guided by my wishes in the matter of a nurse it is hard to judge from this distance. If Susan is the good person you think her we can make many allowances to keep her and perhaps introducing a stranger to Shirley might not suit. Do as your judgement shall dictate and rely upon my approval.[67]

The saga of the nurse highlights the problems that Robert faced as an absentee father. However strongly he might express his views, there was little he could do to alter Louise's decisions when she felt she was correct. Louise had hired Susan by September 1858, and although it took Robert a year, he finally convinced himself that his wife's judgement was more correct than his own. Louise, meanwhile, had had her choice of nurse all the while Robert was making up his mind. Whether he approved the choice or not, Robert was powerless to change it. The affair sheds light on the dynamics of Robert and Louise's relationship. Louise felt secure enough in her position to refuse to yield to her husband's opinions. With location on her side, Louise was free to manage the children as she saw fit.

Ultimately, although Robert needed to present himself as a patriarchal figure through his letters, in reality, his role, like his father's, was secondary to their wives in raising the children. Just as Hill Carter's patriarchal authority was challenged at Shirley by Mary Carter's evangelical authority, so too, Robert's authority over his wife and children was attenuated while he was at sea.

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[67]Oct. 13, 1859.

Robert's concerns about his daughters' upbringing also give an indication of his views about the proper position of women in society. To some extent, these views corresponded with standard southern ideals. He was shocked by the sight of white women performing heavy labor, and he disliked the sight and idea of women who drank. He admired women who were "pious and very refined." By according Louise respect in her role as a mother, Robert was following social conventions that dictated women were more suited to bringing up young children than were men. Robert also encouraged Louise's work in managing her servants, equating this with childraising. Using language remarkably similar when he warned Louise of her influence upon the children, he reminded her "that you are in great measure responsible for the teaching and morality of any young servant you may take." Southern plantation mistresses were expected to oversee the welfare of their slaves, and Robert hoped his wife would not shirk these responsibilities.[68]

Robert was influenced by the importance his culture gave to the bonds of female friendship and family; he encouraged Alice to forge strong ties with Marion so that the two would become "the most affectionate and devoted sisters ever heard of." He hoped that Alice would not only be able to take care of Marion when Louise was busy or sick, but also that Alice would become a companion for her mother. Robert clearly

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[68]Dec. 12, 1858.

understood the important bonds between sisters and between mothers and daughters. He expected the women in his family to appreciate the value of such relationships and used his letters to articulate his views.[69]

But Robert also had strong views about women that were less typically southern. To some extent his absences shaped these opinions. Although while he was away, he gave power of attorney first to his brother-in-law and then to his father, rather than to Louise, it is clear she was managing the household finances. Robert was "delighted to hear" that Louise was paying the bills and hoped that she would "always do such things to the extent of our means." While southern law prohibited Louise from assuming total control over the family's affairs during her husband's absences, Robert was happy to let her take as much control as she could, rather than let one of her male relations assume the role Robert would have played were he at home.[70]

Robert's views about women's health were even less in conformity with southern ideals. He admired women who looked healthy and urged Louise to take plenty of exercise to improve her health.[71] In his opinion, a brisk walk every day would "cure nine tenths of the sickly young women in our first

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[69]RC to Alice Carter, Oct. 26, 1859.

[70]For women's position under the law see Marylynn Salmon, Women and the Law of Property in Early America (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1986).

[71]Nov. 4, Oct. 14, 1854, Sep. 9, 1853, Apr. 15, 1854.

circles." This sentiment echoed the views of northern health reformers.[72] Many Southerners, including Robert's own family, would have been shocked by this attitude, accustomed as they were to the appearance of frailty and defenseless in their own women.[73]

Influenced by his evangelical views, Robert was also critical of the lifestyles of American women in general. Encouraging his daughter not to neglect her studies, he felt it "strange" that so few of "the young ladies of our country" could write clearly "seeing that they have so much leisure time." Robert obviously had little use for the southern belles who spent so much time on frivolous pursuits and not enough on exercise and education--activities that many southerners considered more masculine than feminine. His horror at the idea of Alice attending a dancing school stemmed not from disapproval of dancing itself, which he believed was a social accomplishment, but of the possibility that formal dancing lessons might lead Alice into frivolous or excessive

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[72]Apr. 15, 1854; Kathryn Kish Sklar, Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity (New Haven, Conn., 1973).

[73]Anne Firor Scott covers the image of the elite southern woman thoroughly in her The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930 (Chicago, 1970). Fox-Genovese, Plantation Household, 197, argues that "the emphasis on female delicacy and frailty implicitly recognized the positive value of male strength." Yet the dangers of generalizing for the South as a whole are illustrated by Victoria Bynum in her Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1992). Her study of the North Carolina Piedmont shows that, in many rural areas the "pampered elite lady" was disdained; "white women should be active helpmates to their husbands rather than ornaments" 48-49.

socializing. Robert could not allow his daughter to be so jeopardized.

Religious beliefs were clearly important to Robert. He struggled to reconcile his faith with his life at sea, and the influence of evangelical ideology is apparent in his attitudes toward childrearing and slavery. Like his mother, Robert was worried about his father's apparent lack of faith. He feared that he had failed in his Christian duty to Hill Carter, writing to Louise:

> Do you pray with us for our dear father. . . . Suppose the day of probation be past. . . . We who have been living on the price of his [Hill's] soul, who never told him of his danger though we knew of it, and who have had advantages which he never had, will we be guiltless? Could we enjoy Heaven, knowing that but for our dead Christian life, our neglect of duty he might have been with us?[74]

Robert was obviously suffering divided loyalties toward his father. The patronage system at the Naval Academy had required that Hill use his political connections within the state of Virginia to get Robert a place; to this extent, then, Robert was indebted to his father for his naval career. Hill also gave Robert and Louise several slaves; Robert felt that he and Louise "have got more from Papa" than any of his brothers. Robert and Louise made their home at Shirley for some of the time while he was home, and Louise was welcomed there whenever Robert was at sea. Although Robert's naval

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[74]Mar. 15, 1858.

salary eventually made him financially independent of his father, the filial ties were not yet fully broken.[75]

Robert believed that his father had "done so much for us and works so desperately for us that his love for us is beyond question, and must be very great." Robert may not have experienced any affection from his father, but he knew that fathers should love their children and that this love would drive their actions. He blamed the strained family relations on his brothers and sisters--Hill's kindness to Louise and Alice showed "what he would be to all his children if they would let him." Robert was clearly very defensive about his father. His need to define himself as a loving father and as a good provider may have been part of his own struggles to come to terms with his father's legacy. He feared becoming too much like his own father--not as an adulterer, but rather as an absentee father.

Robert's family life at Shirley sheds light on the problems he encountered at sea. His home was dominated by feminine evangelical authority rather than by masculine patriarchal authority, and this goes a long way to explaining the discomfort Robert felt in the masculine world of shipboard life. His reliance on female support led Robert to doubt his own manliness. Despite, or perhaps because of, his mother's force, Robert needed to define himself as a patriarch as part of his construction of his own masculinity. He had not

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[75]Dec. 12, 1858.

internalized his mother's criticism of his father to the extent that he was unable to conceive of moral paternal authority; thus Robert's domestic masculinity owed as much to southern patriarchy as to evangelicalism. Although his letters created a domestic haven while he was at sea, they also allowed Robert to portray himself as an evangelical patriarch within that domestic world.

CHAPTER III

"The Men Little Monkey Like Creatures and the Women Ugly as Sin"

RACIAL IDENTITY

Defining himself as a patriarch, Robert drew on his notions of race, class, and gender, all of which were heavily influenced by his southernness. He constructed his identity as an elite, white, Tidewater planter using regional, racial, and national characteristics. In Robert's eyes, the true gentleman embodied genteel qualities of civility and culture and had a strong sense of family and racial history. He used these qualities as standards against which to judge foreigners. Robert believed ardently in the innate superiority of Americans and of white Tidewater Americans above all. His letters reveal his sense of a global hierarchy. Although based on race, class, and gender, race was ultimately the most important criterion shaping this hierarchy.

Robert's interest in racial hierarchy was fuelled by antebellum science; the debate over racial origins was being carried out in the national arena by eminent American scientists. Divided between supporters of a single human species and those who argued for diverse origins, the

arguments reached a critical point during the 1850s, the decade in which Robert was travelling widely. The United States navy entered into the huge interest in science, sending numerous expeditions to search for evidence of other civilizations and cultures. Both Robert's trips, to the north Pacific and to South America, were part of this overall objective.[76]

Robert used several criteria to identify racial groups among those he encountered, including skin color, social structure, manner of living, and dress. He was eager, for example, to learn Spanish while in South America, although was "very anxious to learn to speak Spanish well, and for that reason only care to visit in good society." This comment suggests he hoped to learn European Spanish rather than a creolized version. Yet he made no attempt to understand the Pacific islanders or the Japanese islanders, writing to Louise that the natives of Santa Cruz "spoke a jargon utterly unintelligible to us. I dont believe they understand it themselves."[77] Robert's desire to learn only good Spanish suggests that he was extremely conscious of class and that his ideas about race were strongly influenced by his perceptions of what was civilized and what was uncivilized.

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[76]William Stanton, The Leopard's Spots: Scientific Attitudes Toward Race in America, 1815-1859 (Chicago, 1969); Vincent Ponko Jr., Ships, Seas, and Scientists: U. S. Naval Exploration and Discovery in the Nineteenth Century (Annapolis, 1974).

[77]May 1, 1858, Feb. 7, 1854.

Perhaps the strongest indication of what Robert considered civilized, or acceptable, behavior comes from his dealings with those whom he encountered from his home state:

> It may be prejudice but it seems to me that those F.F.Vs (the true ones) do prove to be good people and excell in <u>whiteness</u> wherever they go, they will be ladies and gentlemen under any circumstances.[78]

Robert's biases are obvious in this passage. Southern notions of class and gentility were very strong. Men were chivalrous, women were civilizing, both were genteel. Robert had been inculcated with these ideas since birth. To him, Virginians epitomized charm and gentility. Even his fellow countrymen from outside the Old South lacked these qualities. Robert's explanation of a fellow officer's coarseness--"Poor fellow he is from Nashville, Tenn. which is excuse enough for him"--and the strong meaning implicit in his description of a woman "from the interior, where Revolutionary manners & customs are still vogue," show that, despite ten years spent almost entirely away from Virginia, Robert still exhibited strong regional prejudices against non-Southerners, even against those from outside Tidewater Virginia, particularly where manners, class, and gentility were concerned.[79]

Social graces were so deeply embedded in the culture of the Old South, Robert implied, that its inhabitants never lost

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[78]Aug. 19, 1854, his emphasis.

[79]Oct. 14, 1854, Nov. 16, 1858.

them. His observation suggests that he felt others did. His belief in the innate social superiority of elite white Southerners pervades all his observations about other people, both Americans and foreigners, and is perhaps most obvious in his descriptions of the natives he encountered on his voyage.

His emphasis on whiteness is fascinating. He used the word to characterize elite Virginians and when recounting the social life in port, described two officers from another boat as having been "white enough to call." Clearly, to Robert, white signified extreme good manners and a high degree of civilized behavior.[80]

Robert's use of white as an extremely complimentary adjective, was connected to his use of skin color as a major factor in his racial hierarchy. He was appalled by the islanders of Vanikoro who were "almost Negroes that is they are darker than the Sandwich islanders and have wooly heads. They had a savage and filthy appearance. . . . [and] took no notice of each other's vociferous harangues, more than monkeys when chattering together." He viewed these natives as little more than animals and showed no desire or ability to study their language or culture beyond this initial characterization. Robert made a fascinating equation between animalness and the natives' "inability" to communicate and comprehend. He was more impressed by Ascension, "a large fertile and most beautiful island inhabited by friendly and

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[80]Apr,. 10, 1854.

intelligent savages."[81] This observation seems contradictory, but some explanation can be found in Robert's description of the islanders.

Robert described the Ascension "savages" as "fine looking men of a light copper complexion, beautiful glossy black hair and teeth, perfectly beautiful. . . . They never were cannibals but approach nearer civilization than any other of the Pacific islands." Robert clearly had difficulty in classifying light-skinned islanders with their dark-skinned counterparts. Their appearance, which more nearly approximated the Caucasian ideal, meant that it was more likely that they could achieve civilization. Robert's note that they did not practice cannibalism (implying that other natives did) shows another of his criteria for civilization. Despite the Ascensions' skin color and satisfactory eating habits, however, they were still far from perfect. Robert noted that "the most interesting circumstance connected with this island is the existence of some ruins which shew that it was once the residence of civilized people of whom the present inhabitants know nothing." Unfortunately, Robert does not describe the ruins. His criticism of the Ascensions' lack of interest in their history would have contrasted strongly with the obsessive interest that Tidewater Virginians showed in their lineage. This indifference was a mark of the islanders'

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[81]Feb. 7, Feb. 25, 1854.

lack of civilization to Robert.[82]

The clearest evidence of Robert's division of people primarily by race, however, comes from his descriptions of women. In his travels, Robert encountered women from South Africa, Australia, Japan, China, the Pacific islands, and South America. Robert's relatively liberal ideas about American women are less evident when describing foreign women, when his views on race are more apparent. His attitude toward and descriptions of European and white American women (including Australian immigrants and Spanish women in South America) is markedly different from his attitude toward and descriptions of the native women of Japan, China, the islands, and South America, suggesting that, to Robert, race was a more important division than gender.

The sight of women working, particularly when the men appeared not to be doing so, shocked Robert. In Japan he noted: "The women seem to be in a most abject state of subjection, they also do a large share of the work carrying heavier burdens than the men, they all (the women) run from us as if we were beasts of prey . . . but I attribute this to fear of their own men rather than of us."[83] In Paraguay,

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[82]Feb. 25, 1854. Robert's interest in ruins was common in nineteenth-century science. Ægyptology was a major field of interest, and study of past civilizations was integral to the racial origins debate; see Stanton, Leopard's Spots.

[83]Nov. 26, 1854. By being shocked at being seen as a beast, Robert constructed himself as a disciplined, civilized, and chaste male traveller. He distanced himself further from his "bestial" messmates of whom he disapproved.

Robert found a similar situation, and saw it as:

> one proof of uncivilization here . . . nearly every male is taught to read and write, none of the females. It is common to see a man riding in from the country on horse and his wife walking beside the horse carrying a bundle. In this respect they retain the Indian customs so that at their little country establishments you see the women working incessantly while the men lie about like logs, face downward.[84]

The sight of Japanese and Spanish women provided a stark contrast to the idealized white southern woman to whom Robert was accustomed. Yet at home he would have seen slave women working like dogs in the fields, but he drew no comparison between slave women and Japanese or Spanish women. Robert was shocked to see women working while the men did less physically demanding work; however, he was willing to draw comparisons between the Pacific islanders and "Negroes" and was not shocked by the idea of Chinese women working. It appears that Robert equated these latter two groups, but not the Japanese or the Spanish, with "Negroes," people he thought of as debased in racial terms.

By contrast, laziness of men was another characteristic that Robert felt marked out lesser nations, and he found it particularly common in South America. In the Corrientes market place:

> There were crowds of stout hearty looking men sitting around doing nothing in the world but making silly jokes and smoking paper cigars. I suppose they would consider it disgraceful to till the soil, though many of them hadnt shoes to their feet. I

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[84]May 23, 1859.

> asked a gentleman standing near if those people could not find work, and was told that there would be plenty of work if they were willing to do it, what wonder that such people are always engaged in civil wars. This magnificent country will never be made to produce half that it would until the Spanish race is superseded.[85]

Coming from a plantation, Robert was scornful of anyone who saw disgrace in farming. He was accustomed to hard work (or at least to supervising it), and the idle life of South American men annoyed him. Robert saw idleness as waste. As the South American winter drew in, Robert noticed

> all the people we pass are wrapped in their ponchos and huddled together in sheltered corners. I doubt if the idea of working to keep warm ever occurs to them. If some kind fairy would just pitch these dagoes into the Parana and put a million of Chinese into Paraguay it would soon be a beautiful garden and would supply food enough to feed all the Chinese that are said to die of hunger.[86]

Robert believed that men should carry out physical work and that women should not be expected to do so. (Whether he appreciated the hard physical work that women carried out in the home is impossible to discover.) For a man to shirk this responsibility was a slight on his masculinity. The hard work that Robert carried out on board ship or on the plantation was therefore an indication to him of his masculinity.

When describing Spanish women in particular, Robert was obsessed by physical beauty, never writing about them without mentioning their appearance. Arriving in Buenos Aires on the

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[85]May 14, 1859.

[86]May 19, 1859.

first stage of his second voyage, Robert wrote to Louise that he had gone for a walk "to see the costumes and churches, and I am much disappointed in both, neither have I met a woman even passably pretty." This disappointment was lessened by a trip to the opera where, although "'Il Trovatore' was indifferently played . . . , some of the beauties were dressed with great taste and very richly." On arriving in "a dull little village called Las Conchas," Robert was pleased to find "some very kind people and lots of pretty girls." The view was not always so good, however. In Asuncion, Robert "met lots of 'meriñaques' (crinolins) and various plaid silk dresses but all under ugly faces."[87]

Robert had been led by some of his "enthusiastic countrymen" to expect "the charming society" of Buenos Aires to be "exceedingly attractive," and this may be one reason why he described all its women in physical terms.[88] However, a more likely explanation is that Robert, influenced by southern society that often saw women as decorative objects, saw nothing wrong in describing women in terms of their beauty, much as he might describe other possessions. Robert himself may not have thought of women in such terms but may have unconsciously reverted to his society's methods of description. Alternatively, coming from a society where women

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[87]Apr. 1, Apr. 9, May 24, 1858, May 20, 1859. Also, for example, May 27, 1858, Jul. 25, Oct. 13, 1859.

[88]Apr. 15, 1858.

were often judged on their beauty, neither Robert nor Louise may have even considered using any other way to describe women.

The beauty of Spanish women, however, was sometimes not enough for Robert:

> The truth is that these people [women] are very pretty as a general thing, particularly in the street, they have such splendid eyes and hair, and walk so gracefully; but not one in forty will bear inspection or can entertain a gentleman longer than fifteen minutes, unless they be dancing, or some such amusement on hand; and these Buenos Ayreans are aping European manners and dress very much to their detriment in my estimation.

To construct his racial hierarchy with white Americans at the top, Robert needed to portray other nations as less advanced, even primitive. The Buenos Ayreans' aping of "European manners and dress" ranked South American indigenous culture below European, which was itself inferior to American society in Robert's eyes. A belief in the innate superiority of American culture characterized Robert's opinions of the foreigners he met on his travels, and this attitude was especially clear in his dealings with the native inhabitants of the countries he visited.[89]

Robert's constructions of race and gender were interconnected. He had a ranking system based on race for the women he encountered and used different criteria to judge each group. At the top were American women, whom he placed even

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[89]Reginald Horsman discusses American notions of superiority in Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of Racial Anglo-Saxonism (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

above his Spanish paragons of beauty. He wrote to Louise from an Argentine village that "if you were a Spanish lady no doubt you would find it very pleasant, but I dont see how a lady from our country can be comfortable even in Buenos Aires, for they dont understand what comfort or cleanliness is anywhere that I have been." Below Americans came Europeans, below them the Japanese, and at the bottom, indigenous people of various places. Robert's views about women cannot be separated from his notions of racial hierarchy.

Robert's description of the island natives shows another factor he saw as important in ranking foreigners and used to define himself against--standards of cleanliness. The Vanikorons had a "filthy appearance," and Robert found the Chinese so dirty that when using hoses to try to repel beggars from the Vincennes he commented that this "gave many of them a better washing than they seemed to have had for some time." The entire continent of South America seemed unclean to Robert. He found Corrientes, in Argentina, "a small, dirty looking place," the streets of Buenos Aires "narrow and filthy," and travelling up the Parana river, he saw several "dirty little villages." Robert wrote of the Bolivian Indians that he had "never seen a lower race of human beings . . . they eat whatever comes in their way . . . and their habits and utter neglect of cleanliness are nauseating to think

of."[90]

There is little explicit reference to blacks or to slavery in the letters, which is surprising given Robert's background and the growing sectional tensions of the 1850s. However, his global racial hierarchy implicitly justified slavery. Robert's religious views suggest that he would have followed the single-species school of human origin. Particularly popular among southern intellectuals, this theory relied on a strictly biblical explanation. All mankind was descended from Adam, with distinctions among peoples resulting from environmental adaptation. Races that were inferior to Caucasians might perhaps be improved by learning from their superiors.[91]

With these beliefs, Robert was free to articulate the classic slaveowner's defense of slavery that blacks were better off under slavery than they would be under freedom. Robert noted the similarity between Paraguay, a country under a strong dictatorship, and plantations. "Paraguay is one great big estate," he wrote to Louise, "all the inhabitants are slaves. Lopez is Old master and his sons young masters; this is actually the case, but like all slaves the people are gay[,] cheerful and apparently contented." Robert believed that slaveowners had a paternal duty toward their slaves; his

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[90]June 15, 1854, Jan. 1, 1859, Mar. 31, Jul. 5, 1858, Mar. 7, 1860.

[91]Stanton, Leopard's Spots.

position as heir to a large plantation fundamentally shaped his attitude toward blacks, and, it appears, to most indigenous peoples.[92]

He must have been a little concerned, therefore, by the situation he encountered in South Africa. He noted how Cape Town had prospered under the English, but that "the Dutch population don't appear and the remnant of it are generally not in very good circumstances the emancipation of Slaves which were formerly very numerous has ruined them." The parallel between the Dutch and southern slaveholders must have been apparent and disconcerting to Robert. He was, however, slightly reassured: "The drivers are always English or negroes, of whom a large number are employed and conduct themselves much more like our slaves than the blacks in the free states, calling all white gentlemen 'master'."[93]

Robert discussed slaves with Louise only in relation to the search for a nurse for the children and when stressing their Christian duty to educate and care for their slaves. Yet Steven Stowe has discovered that few elite slaveholding Southerners mention slavery in their personal letters, so Robert was not exceptional in this respect.[94] Thus, although Robert rarely mentioned slavery in his letters, his

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[92]May 19, 23, 1859.

[93]Sep. 30, 1853.

[94]Steven M. Stowe, Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Love of Planters (Baltimore, 1987).

construction of a detailed racial hierarchy, which placed slaves at the bottom, implicitly justified a system of racial slavery. This hierarchy was an integral part of Robert's self-construction as a southern patriarch.

As an elite Virginian, Robert had strong opinions about class and gentility. His vision of society was profoundly affected by his perceptions of class, race, and gender, and these perceptions are apparent in his descriptions of the people whom he encountered on his voyages. Convinced that the true gentleman was an elite white Southerner, perhaps even an elite white Virginian, he used these notions to articulate his racial stratification. His letters also reveal his belief in the innate superiority of all things American in comparison to foreign peoples and customs.[95]

He did not believe, however, that the United States should necessarily try to convert the rest of the world to its way of thinking. He was not altogether convinced of the need for intervention, believing in fact that this often did more harm than good. Although he confided to Louise that Argentina could never "be free until some great power subverts all existing authorities and starts them afresh," he was totally opposed to American intervention in Paraguay, which he called

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[95]Horsman examines similar American attitudes in Race and Manifest Destiny.

a "filibuster expedition."[96]

Robert blamed European deserters and Australian refugees on Ascension for teaching the natives to be dishonest. This feeling that Western interference might do more harm than good was echoed when Robert reached the Japanese islands. Although the Japanese frequently infuriated him with their attempts to prevent excessive contact with foreigners, he wondered to Louise:

> Just think of a whole nation living in peace and harmony with no knowledge of war, kind and corteous to strangers . . . and in order to keep up this state of simple comfort anxious to avoid contact with all the world[,] beside communication with which would change their customs . . . altogether I think the world would do better to let them have their own way. I even doubt the propriety of forcing missionaries upon them as is done now.[97]

Working on an expedition whose object was to establish trade links with the eastern islands, Robert's recognition that perhaps links with the West would do the islanders more harm than good is surprising. As a devout Christian, moreover, his doubts of the value of missionary work are even more surprising, particularly given that from the mid-nineteenth century, most Americans at home were strong supporters of the notion of christianizing "savages" all over the world.

Robert's southern roots are most clear in his attitude toward people he considered foreigners, which may have included anyone from outside his home state. Antebellum

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[96]May 2, Jan. 4, 1859.

[97]Feb. 25, Dec. 16, 1854.

science informed his perceptions of race strongly, as he defined himself in opposition to all that he considered inferior. His strong belief in the superiority of all things southern is apparent in his construction of a racial, national, and regional identity that was integral to his sense of masculinity.

CONCLUSION

Robert Carter was brought up to be a member of the Virginia elite, yet the naval world in which he lived bore little resemblance to the antebellum South. On board ship, men experienced a harsh physical environment. Women were excluded, and there was heavy drinking and riotous living. To some extent, parallels can be drawn between this life and Wyatt-Brown's characterization of the male world in the South. Naval men and Southern men were expected to be strong and patriarchal, but Robert was most content in the domestic female world of his letters and his household in Virginia.

Through his letters to Louise, Robert was able to construct a private domestic world into which he was able to escape. In his letters, Robert explained and justified his weaknesses and thus could gain strength from them. Unable to be a southern patriarch on board ship, Robert exerted control over his wife and family through his letters. Much of Robert's unhappiness seems to stem from the fundamental incompatibility of the nineteenth-century southern cultural conventions with which he was inculcated, his evangelical beliefs, and the naval life he was forced to follow. Robert's letters to Louise were vital to him because in them he could attempt to reconcile these conflicting worlds and thus gain

some comfort.

This study shows that people's identities can be fragmented and conflicted. Robert Carter's identities included professional, domestic, and imperial personas. His domestic identity clearly conflicted with qualities expected from a nineteenth-century naval officer, and cleavage between the two caused Robert to doubt his manliness and to construct his own notion of masculinity. He came from a home that was dominated by feminine rather than masculine authority. He rejected his mother's authority as he set himself up as a southern patriarch, yet he also drew on his mother's evangelical ideas as he constructed his own authority. Robert's relatively dynamic ideas about the position of white women and of childrearing contrasted with his static ideas of race and class.

Robert was a naval officer, an elite Southerner, and an evangelical Christian. Yet he conforms to historians' uniform model of none of these three. His discomfort with masculine shipboard life and his notions of family do not appear to conform to traditional interpretations of naval or southern men. Unlike many evangelical southerners, lower or middle class men and women, Robert came from the elite--his position in society had already given him the status that most evangelicals sought through their faith. This examination of Robert Carter's identity demonstrates the danger of assuming

that social, religious, or regional groups are essentially homogenous. The conjunction of his religious views with his southern notions of class and gentility was unlikely to have been unique in the antebellum South and suggests that southern masculinity even at the height of sectional tensions was far more complex than scholars have realized.

Robert returned home from South America in 1860 to a country divided by sectional tension. He resigned from the United States Navy in 1861 and joined the Confederate Navy, but spent most of the war in England, Holland, and Spain. By 1865, however, he was in Havana and at the end of the war he joined a blockade runner bound for Glasgow. Back in Great Britain he received his British Master's Certificate, and apparently intended to settle in England, calling for Louise to join him. A desperate plea from his father, however, to come home and run the plantation caused him to abandon his naval life. Robert received a pardon from President Johnson in August 1866 and returned to Shirley where he spent the remainder of his days as a planter in the post-war South until his death in 1888.[98]

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[98]Biographical details from Greg Williams, "Guide to the Papers of Shirley Plantation," Colonial Williamsburg Foundation Library,

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